

Preparation of California High School Students for College

A CALIFORNIA POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION COMMISSION FACT SHEET



As the numbers of California high school graduates continue to rise over the next ten to fifteen years, demand for postsecondary education is expected to expand as well. But it is not only the increase in numbers of graduates that will challenge postsecondary education but also their changing social, cultural, and academic characteristics and the expectations they bring to our colleges and universities. Improving the academic preparation of the State's public high school graduates has been a conscious public policy pursued since 1983. This Fact Sheet examines recent changes in the academic characteristics of our high school graduates with a focus on those performance measures directly related to university eligibility.

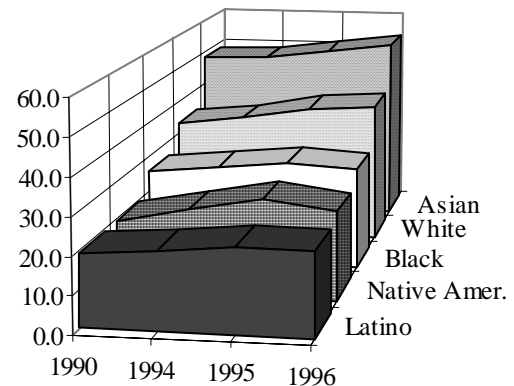
College preparatory curriculum completed by graduates of public high schools

The freshman admission criteria of the California State University and the University of California require applicants to complete nearly identical college preparatory curriculum. Since 1986, public high schools have reported the numbers of graduates who have completed such a college preparatory curriculum. Beginning in 1994-95, high schools limited this count to only those graduates who had completed these courses with a grade of "C" or better. Despite this narrower definition, the proportion of public high school graduates completing such a curriculum grew from 31.3 percent in 1990 to 35.4 percent in 1996. Increasing proportions of students from all racial-ethnic groups completed this curricular patterns between 1990 and 1995, as Display 1 shows. However, completion rates for Black, Latino, and Native American graduates dropped slightly between 1995 and 1996.

Participation in Advanced Placement examinations

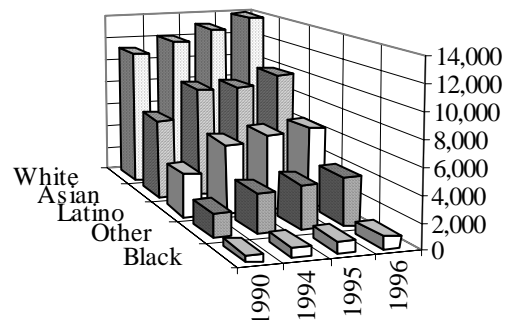
Another indicator of changes in the preparation level of students for college is the increasing numbers and proportions of California twelfth graders who are taking Advanced Placement (AP) examinations. Successful participation on these examinations -- earning a score of 3 or better -- may earn the student actual college credit.

DISPLAY 1 Proportion of Public High School Graduates Completing a College Preparatory Curriculum, 1990, 1994 to 1996



Participation in these tests grew from 10.0 percent in 1990 to 13.4 percent in 1996. As with college preparatory course completion, AP participation increased for all student groups, as Display 2 illustrates. Unfortunately, sharp differences in participation rates remain among graduates from different racial-ethnic groups.

DISPLAY 2 Public High School Seniors Taking Advanced Placement Examinations, 1990, 1994 to 1996



Participation and performance on college admissions examinations

California's public universities require many, if not all, freshman applicants to submit scores on a standardized college admissions examination -- the SAT I or the ACT. Between 1990 and 1996, the number of California high

school seniors taking the SAT I grew by 18 percent -- from 112,198 to 132,711 -- during a period in which there was only a 10 percent increase in the number of graduates. Growth in participation in the ACT by Californians was even more explosive -- a 77 percent increase -- from 17,938 to 31,663. SAT I and ACT participation expanded among all student groups, as Display 3 shows. However, beginning in 1995, the growth in students taking the SAT I slowed or decreased for all student groups; the same trend is evident in 1996 for ACT test takers.

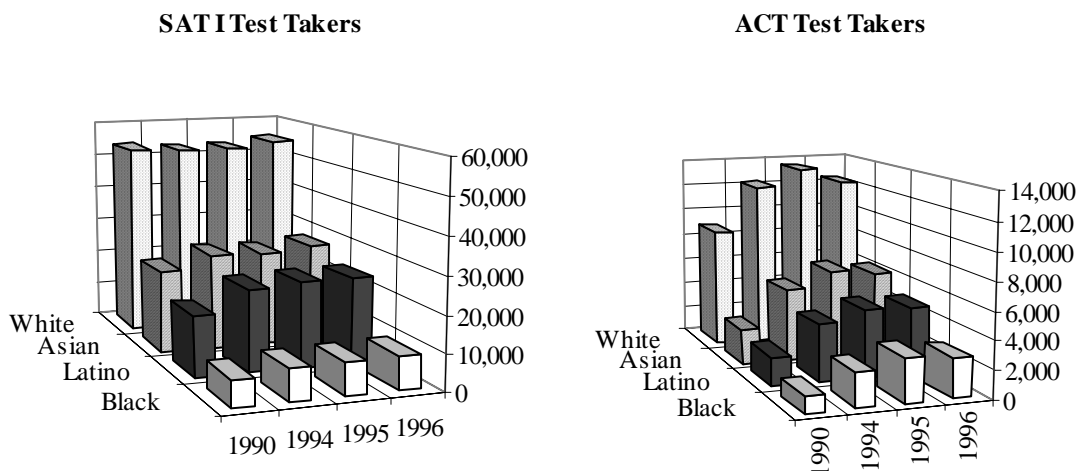
Despite this expansion in the numbers of students taking college admission tests, the average SAT I and ACT scores of California students was unchanged between 1990 and 1996, as shown in Display 4 below. However, the average SAT I scores for Asian and White test takers improved, while those of Black and Latino test takers decreased.

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Implications for eligibility

Both in numbers and proportionality, more California high school graduates are completing each of the academic requirements needed to qualify for admission to our public universities. However, eligibility for the university is a summative, interactive result of these various academic measures. The Commission will soon complete its 1996 Eligibility Study. This study will provide precise, historically comparable estimates of the proportion of 1996 public high school graduates who were eligible for university admission based on the current set of requirements for each of the public university systems. The results of the study will provide crucial information from which to plan for future enrollment growth.

DISPLAY 3 Participation of California High School Seniors in the SAT I and ACT Tests, 1990, 1994 to 1996



DISPLAY 4 SAT I Verbal and Math Scores and ACT Composite Scores for California Seniors, 1990 and 1996

